

Business owner keeps working despite vision loss

EILEEN ZAFFIRO-KEAN - STAFF WRITER

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ORMOND BEACH -- ORMOND BEACH - **The** hand fate dealt Mary Pepe a year ago would have sent some people into self-imposed solitary confinement.

After years of living normally with a slow-moving case of macular degeneration, Pepe's sight took a sudden dive. Almost overnight, she had trouble seeing well enough to drive and read. Even faces blurred.

"It got bad in about a month," **the** 78-year-old said. "It's like a dimming. It's like going from a 100-watt bulb to a 30-watt bulb."

Her worst-case scenario became her reality. Pepe is legally blind now.

But she hasn't been cowering inside her house. She has continued to run **the** Daytona Beach hair salon she and her late husband opened 50 years ago, including doing **the** books and handling payroll with **the** help of a computer-like device that magnifies type.

She has continued to live alone, do all her usual housework, go out with friends almost every day, visit her kids and grandkids every week and cook - one of her favorite pastimes.

"If you're dealt something you really have no control over, you have to find a way to survive and live happily," Pepe said. "As long as I'm not dying of any horrible disease I'm going to live and enjoy it."

She concedes having an illness that spun out of control threw her off balance **for** a while.

"It was very scary at first," Pepe said. "I was afraid, especially at night. I was afraid to close my eyes and go to sleep because I thought, 'what if I open them in **the** morning and can't see?' "

Pepe can still see what's around her, just in a way that's dimmed and missing detail. Her doctor tells her she'll probably never go completely blind, but she doesn't know if she's hit her visual bottom yet.

"You just don't know. I still don't know how bad it'll get," she said.

Pepe said she wore contacts in **the** past, but she never had a serious vision problem. Her first sign of trouble came about 10 years ago, when she noticed she was having trouble seeing numbers in **the** phonebook clearly.

She got cataract surgery, which helped, but not too long afterward she was diagnosed with macular degeneration. **The** eye disease causes a loss of sight in **the** center of **the** visual field because of damage to **the** retina.

Her macular degeneration was controlled **for** about five years with injections and a special vitamin regimen, but last March that stopped working.

Pepe credits **the Center for the Visually Impaired** in Daytona Beach with helping her to keep doing most everything she always has.

"She's picking herself up and getting training," said Ronee Hudson, **the** center's executive director. "She's a survivor."

The private nonprofit agency has taught her skills to live with impaired sight, and introduced her to devices that have helped her to live alone more comfortably. She has a clock that announces **the** time, a device that alerts her when water is boiling on **the** stove, a special tape player she uses to listen to books on tape, and glasses with magnifying devices attached that help her watch TV.

"Aren't these ugly?" she asked, holding up **the** glasses with thick magnifiers. "But if you're here alone and you want to see **the** cute guys on TV these help."

She's still mourning **the** loss of things she had to give up, especially reading and driving. Not driving has turned **the** independent business owner into someone who has to slow down and line up a driver **for** every trip to **the** grocery store, bank and church.

She has a team of friends who drive her around now, but she misses **the** spontaneity of popping in to see her grandkids or zipping over to **the** grocery store **for** milk.

She also misses **the** walks she used to take on **the** beach every morning at 6 a.m. She's afraid now of tripping or misjudging **the** tide, and after her husband died seven years ago she moved from their home near **the** ocean to a 55-and-older gated community in Ormond Beach.

She has a circle of good friends in **the** Aberdeen neighborhood who have become reliable companions **for** eating out, movies, church and conversation.

Her children say their mother has adapted so well they don't need to do a lot of worrying.

"She's been a trooper and not let this slow her down," said her son, 52-year-old Dean Pepe.

"She's been determined and has kind people helping. She's not isolated. I'm proud of her **the** way she's still working and wants to be self-sufficient."

One of Pepe's two daughters, 50-year-old Denise Bennett, has worked in Pepe's Hair Designers on Mason Avenue alongside her mother **for** more than 25 years.

"She never dwells on it," Bennett said. "She's been very positive. Sometimes you forget and she has to remind us she can't see. She's **the** strong silent type so you don't worry . . . I'm really proud of her."

Pepe has worked hard to not be a burden on her children, or to be a source of sadness **for** them. But her kids say there have been some heartbreaking days.

"Every time it got a little worse it was hard," Bennett said. "One day it sucked **the** life out of her, but she picked herself up. She was very proactive in her own recovery, always seeing if there was anything more she could do."

The unknown has been difficult, Dean Pepe said.

Pepe said she focuses on everything she can do.

"I have a list three pages long of things to be happy about," she said. "I can get up in **the** morning and walk, and talk, and eat, work, shop, cook, breathe on my own, hear, spend holidays with my children. Life is what you make it."

Pepe has no plans to retire. She still gets up with **the** sun, does her hair and puts on makeup.

"When I'm in **the** shop it's alive," she said. "I'm with people. It's living."

Pepe still holds out hope a cure will come along in her lifetime, and she refuses to sell **the** car she misses driving so much - just in case.

"I do believe in God, and I do believe in miracles," she said.

If **the** miracle never comes, Pepe will continue to accept **the** eye disease and live a happy life.

"This is what I have and I hope nothing else comes along," she said. "I go to church every

Sunday and I tell God, 'please don't give me anything worse.' I'm not a hero. I'm just doing **the** only thing I know how to do. I'll do **the** best I can as long as I can. I'm not going to give up."

She paused a moment and looked toward a window that faces her backyard. She can still see enough to know that **the** sun was shining, and that she was taking in **the** view of a tranquil pond within a stone's throw.

"It's a beautiful day today," she said. "It's warm, sunny. I think I'll go **for** a walk."